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ABSTRACT

The interaction between post separation adjustment for reunited military families and the Women's Liberation Movement is a complex occurrence which is beginning to have a profound effect on some military families. Two forces are acting upon wives of servicemen that subject marriages to conflicts previously unheard of. One force is the critical period of reunion when husband and wife must readjust to each other after a prolonged separation. The second force is the impact which the Women's Liberation Movement has had on the wives while the husbands were away. During the husband's absence (on an unaccompanied overseas tour), the wife has become an independent head of household. The wife must again revert to a dependent role after the return of her husband which may result in complex interpersonal and social conflicts. The focus of this paper is on the conceptualization of these two forces, the effect it has on the couple, and how treatment may assist to stabilize the marriage. (Author)

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POST SEPARATION ADJUSTMENT AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

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POST SEPARATION ADJUSTMENT AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Introduction

The interaction between post separation adjustment for reunited military families and the Women's Liberation Movement is a complex occurrence which is beginning to have a profound effect on some military families. Two forces are acting upon wives of servicemen that subject marriages to conflicts previously unheard of.

One force is the critical period of reunion when husband and wife must readjust to each other after a prolonged separation. The second force is the impact which the Women's Liberation Movement has had on the wives while the husbands were away. The consequences are the wife being subjected to revert to a dependent role after the husband returns from an unaccompanied overseas tour. She has lost, upon her spouse's return, the role of an independent, emerging woman she had begun to enjoy during his absence. While the homecoming of the husband is viewed consciously by both as a happy reunion, slowly the wife unconsciously begins to resent her mate's return. The confusing state of undirected frustration, guilt, and hopelessness felt by the wife is not understood by the husband. In many cases neither the husband nor the wife are aware of why the marriage is in difficulty. The focus of this paper will be on the conceptualization of these two forces, the effect it has on the couple, and how treatment may assist to stabilize the marriage.

Background

Recent social-psychological research regarding military families during post separation reunion and reintegration has focused on the readjustment process and associated problems. A wealth of clinical data have been collected and processed regarding dysfunctional interpersonal relationships and coping behaviors (cf., Metres, McCubbin & Hunter, 1974; McCubbin, Dahl, Metres, Hunter & Plag, 1974; McCubbin, Dahl & Hunter, 1975; McCubbin & Dahl, 1975; Farish, Baker & Robertson, 1976). Additional social science research examining husband-wife role relationships within the military reveals role definition and identification difficulties in these marriages. Some investigators (Stanton, 1975; Stoddard & Cabanillas, 1975) feel that there is a relationship between marital difficulties and the growing influence of the Women's Liberation Movement.

Aside from marital problems within military families, other researchers have found evidence to support the theory that recent changes in women's roles and independence are having an adverse effect on marriages in the civilian sector.

Dr. Virginia Abernathy (1976) discusses sex role stereotypes and how our culture presently limits, within marriage, the wife's self-concept.

later, unanticipated growth on the part of the woman upsets the balance of marriage. Casady (1975) reports that many wives, feeling trapped in housewife roles, are running out on their husbands and families. Humphrey (1975) suggests that marriage counselors adopt a reality orientation toward changing sex roles.

The conclusions from these examples of recent research suggests that a husband and wife, reuniting after a prolonged separation, may face a difficult and potentially dangerous readjustment process. In addition, marriages, both in and out of the military, are subject to increased stress in interpersonal relationships due to expanding roles and newly-gained independence of American women. In summary, the Women's Liberation Movement may be having a negative effect on the institution of marriage, especially a marriage subjected to the additional strain of a forced, prolonged separation where the wife was required to become the head of the household during the husband's absence.

Conceptualization

Most of the knowledge about the interaction of post separation readjustment and women's liberation is an outgrowth of studies on the families of returned Vietnam prisoners of war. The U.S. Navy's Center for Prisoner of War Studies has documented the ex-POW's difficulty (Metres, McCubbin & Hunter, 1974) in adjusting to their wives new-found independence. When the husbands returned home they found their wives were successful at running a household and managing a family. The traditional "role" of the male head of the household had been taken over by the wife and, in many cases, they were reluctant to relinquish control back to her spouse. The husband felt "left out" and perceived himself as an unimportant element in the family and marriage.

Stanton (1975) explains that an increasing number of servicemen's wives have sought jobs in order to supplement their incomes. This trend, he states, is a result of new images and roles of women and their vocational emancipation. Stoddard and Cabanillos (1975) suggest that gradual marital and family instability in military personnel is due in part to the growing influence of the Women's Liberation Movement which is attempting to destroy demeaning, outdated female stereotypes.

In the past, law enforcement and private "missing persons" agencies spent much of their time hunting wayward husbands. Today, the missing people are not husbands, but wives (Casady, 1975). They are escaping a marriage they see as totally dissatisfying. The wives feel unwanted, unappreciated, unneeded, and unfulfilled. Freedom, self-determination, and a hope for self-fulfillment are major reasons for abandoning their marriage.

The question is, why does this happen? What causes a couple to go in opposite directions after reunion? Are these problems peculiar only to military marriages?

The process of two people rejoining their lives after a separation of a year or longer has been an accepted way of life with the military, most recently during the Vietnam conflict. Whatever occurs within the home-comer when he returns is a unique and personal experience. Schutz (1964) explained that:

The home to which he returns is by no means the home he left or the home which he recalled and longed for during his absence. And, for the same reason the homecomer is not the same man who left. He is neither the same for himself nor for those who await his return. (1964, pp. 115-116)

A Los Angeles psychiatrist (*Time*, February 19, 1973) spoke of the problems encountered by married Vietnam POW's during the post release readjustment period. He referred to the aftermath of marital tragedies as the "zombie reaction." The returnee had idealized the woman he would return to, cherishing an impossible dream in order to survive. In most cases this dream would crumble. A recent issue of a popular magazine (*People*, May 3, 1976) had an article on eight ex-POW's trying to cope with our changing country. Three of the eight were divorced as a consequence of their POW experiences and three others reported the need for therapeutic intervention after return in order to make a successful adjustment. Retired Navy Captain James Mulligan while successfully reunited with his wife, reported sensing a new assertiveness on her part upon his return. She had become a leader in the POW wives movement. Colonel Theodore Guy, USAF, said his marriage broke up seven months after repatriation. "She had just grown differently than I during those five years. We were strangers."

Another Vietnam veteran (Weintraub, 1973) said the hardest part about returning home was trying to fit back exactly where you left off. You couldn't wait to visit old school friends but when you got together things just weren't the same.

This difficult homecoming readjustment is not just a recent reaction to the Vietnam conflict. The tale of Rip Van Winkle created by Washington Irving in 1819-20 recounted the confusion experienced after Van Winkle woke from his twenty-year sleep. Over three thousand years ago, Homer's story, the *Odyssey*, described Ulysses' bewilderment when he returned home after a twenty-year journey. Historically, there is evidence that the difficult readjustment people (especially soldiers) face has been a problem for at least as long as man has been waging war (Worthington, 1973).

Jo Ann Wendt (1974), in her article, "Remote Tour After-Shock," explains the extent of the homecoming adjustment problem within the military. She writes about "separation after-shock" and describes how readjustment after separation is determined by what had happened during the separation.

In most instances the male spouse is the active duty military family member. He is sent away to serve a short tour in an overseas area.

Furthermore, he is sent to a strange environment where he spends most (if not all) of his time involved in his job. He is the one who will attempt to return to a way of life and a family he left behind. For him, the passage of time has not changed his expectations of his wife and family. Even though changes have occurred back home, because he did not experience them, they do not exist. Psychologically, he will be returning to the home and people he left when he departed for his overseas assignment a year before. In actuality though, he has changed; he has lived for a year or more in a new and different environment. The man who returns is not the man who left.

The wife, although not necessarily changing her physical environment, usually is forced to experience a major life style change. Prior to separation, many military wives are in a passive, reactive position. The demands of the military life style cause the couple (and more so the wife) to react to situations and/or events which effect their lives (e.g., military schooling, promotions, social requirements, transfers, military regulations governing dependents, etc.). After the husband's departure, the wife has the opportunity to seek freedom from the military environment and, if she desires, total separation from any military involvement. (Most wives, though, retain at least minimal contact through utilization of military benefits; i.e., P.X., commissary, and medical treatment facilities.) The wife, mostly through necessity, has become extremely independent during the husband's absence. As McCubbin and Dahl (1975) found, the wife has functioned in the role of head of household; she has matured, gained self-confidence, and developed a life style devoid of her mate. Previously, military and social customs were such that the wife willingly relinquished this role to her husband upon his return. Today, broad changes in our social structure have occurred, particularly the Women's Movement, which support the new independent roles of the wives, making it difficult for them to revert back to previously dependent status.

The Women's Liberation Movement (c.f., Adler, 1975; Collins, 1976; Huber, 1974; Kaye, 1976; Stanford, 1974) is a sociological phenomenon of the 1970's. This is the decade of the emerging woman. This social movement advocates the equality of the sexes. Even the most secure of male bastions, the military, is falling beneath the assault of the Women's Movement. Women are serving as military aircraft pilots, senior officers commanding all male units, and now, our nation's military academies have accepted female cadets. The myth that female fulfillment is limited only to the role of wife, homemaker, and motherhood is being exploded. The expansion of vocational options available to women is not without its toll, though. Conflicts, previously unheard of among females, have developed over the changing roles and image of the young women of today (c.f., Halas, 1974; Humphrey, 1975; Komarovsky, 1974; Weisman & Paykel, 1974). Many women report feelings of dissatisfaction and relate it to an awareness of sex-role discrimination. Dena Kaye (1976) discusses what she terms business sexuality, a new atmosphere where custom, habit, psychology, and historic patterns blend to create a continuous obstacle. This inhibits men and women working together and detracts from their realizing their full potential. Mental health professionals see this as a prime factor in promoting mental illness among young women (Gove & Tudor, 1974; Weissman & Paykel, 1974).

The conflicts and problems have had a reversal effect on the military wives of husbands on unaccompanied assignments. The Women's Movement advocates equal treatment, responsibilities, and recognition, especially in areas which were previously considered "all male." In many ways, these objectives have been successfully met by wives during their husband's absence. Some wives are reluctant to give up their newly-acclaimed and much enjoyed independence, but they do. In essence, the husband comes home, expecting to return to a family life as it was, thinking this is what the wife also desires. The wife, aware of what her husband wants, reluctantly attempts to provide this. In time, she begins to resent this decision, her position, her family, and her husband; she feels trapped.

The wife begins to neglect home and family. While both husband and wife are aware of her subtle changes, he is at a loss as to why she is different and she usually denies any outward change. She tends to isolate herself and withdraws from her husband and slowly sinks into a pattern of feeling and acting helpless, hopeless, and unneeded. In more serious cases this object loss (independent life style) can and does lead to a neurotic depressive reaction.

The woman is subjected to inner conflict as she is forced into a role she has successfully left. At the same time she must also contend with the social and psychological pressures resulting from other liberated women who now view her (or so she assumes) as a turncoat.

Case History

An example of the post separation adjustment syndrome and the Women's Liberation Movement is illustrated in the case of Sara and Ralph.

Sara is a 30 year old mother of two. She married immediately after graduating from high school. Her husband, in the National Guard, was six years her elder. Shortly after their marriage, he went on active duty, and began a military career. Their tours included assignments with military units, military and civilian schools, and two unaccompanied short overseas tours. The first short tour was in Vietnam in the mid-sixties. The second tour was in the early 1970's in Korea. While Sara had the same responsibilities during both separations, she had more freedom because the children were older during Ralph's second tour and she became more aware of her independence.

Sara found it extremely difficult to return to her previous role after Ralph returned, especially after the excitement of the reunion period wore off. As time passed (12-16 months) she became less satisfied with her life and increasingly more depressed. Neither she nor Ralph knew why.

While Sara refused to accept her mental state, her husband sought professional help. Eventually Sara was persuaded to recognize her position and enter into a treatment program with the author. The treatment consisted of helping the couple to realize what had happened and why. It involved

many sessions of exploring each one's concept of their own roles and their expectations of each other's roles. The couple began to accept the situation and realistically reappraise their relationships to each other, their marriage, and their family. They very slowly become aware of who they were and how their lives together could either promote or defeat self-fulfillment. If the marriage were to succeed, each had to compromise. Both individual sessions and joint couple sessions were held over a period of eight weeks. In time a realistic impression of each other emerged.

The initial goal was to get Sara to acknowledge her strengths as well as all of her self-described faults. Psychological testing instruments (IQ tests, projective tests, personality inventories, vocational tests, etc.) were used to show Sara that her abilities were much greater than she would give herself credit for. Her interests, likes, dislikes, fears, and long repressed feelings were discussed. Through self-expression she became cognizant of her true self. Individual sessions with the husband were also very necessary to help him to realize that his wife was a person in her own worth. He slowly became aware of his behavior and how it restricted Sara's self growth. Joint sessions aided in their understanding of each other and in working out a viable plan to allow both partners to continue in their marriage yet pursue independent paths for self-fulfillment. Sara requested additional vocational testing and through an employment agency located a job as a receptionist and office assistant in a large automobile agency in the city where they lived. Her employer wanted a mature woman who had the ability to field a multitude of inquiries and respond appropriately without constant supervision. He was impressed with her intelligence, maturity, and confidence.

While their life did not reverse itself overnight, it had improved immensely. Both partners were much happier and working together to build a better marriage and improve their own self satisfaction.

Treatment

Successful treatment is not a simple matter; it involves both members of the marital partnership. A major therapeutic goal lies in the ability of the woman to identify the cause of her depressed state; that is, the loss of her newly emerged identification, her independence. The difficult part is that this becomes almost impossible unless the husband can understand what has happened to their marriage relationship and realize how their future is dependent upon his willingness to change also. While the woman unconsciously desires her independence she usually avoids any direct confrontation with her spouse. Being aware of her internal conflict is one thing; asking her to react to it, against her husband's understanding of a wife's role, is another thing entirely.

Therapeutic intervention, therefore, becomes a three pronged approach. An effort must be made to help the wife identify the source of her conflict. This is usually done by individual counseling sessions. An integral part of her therapy is the involvement of supportive counseling to include psycho-diagnostic evaluation to assist in measuring the wife's strengths and

weaknesses. Appropriate feedback to the wife is a necessary part of the treatment. In conjunction with the wife's treatment the husband also needs help to realize what is happening to his wife and why. He must understand that successful treatment of the wife (and the salvage of their marriage) depends on his understanding, compassion, and the support he can lend her. In most cases this requires that he accept the new role his wife seeks and in turn, redefine his role as husband and marital partner. There is a direct relationship between the husband's desire to maintain the marriage and his ability to change.

Many times marriages have sustained this complex conflict, but in name only. Each goes their own way while remaining married for the sake of their children, convenience, religion, or because of strong social or family pressures.

A key element in the therapeutic process is an undeniable belief, shared by husband, wife, and therapist, that the couple is willing to compromise because, above all else, they want and need a successful marriage which each can share and develop with their partner. Without this conviction there is no common goal for each to strive for; without this, each would go their own way or ignore the agony of the other.

The first prong is the wife's ability to identify the source of her inner turmoil. The second prong is the husband's ability to understand the manifestations of their conflict and his willingness to change himself. The third prong involves conjoint therapy to help the couple to work together to rebuild their marriage. The beginning of therapy is dependent on the wife being able to examine herself, her beliefs, her identification, and being able to articulate and understand the role in life that she wants, not what familial or societal pressures dictate. The outcome of therapy is dependent on the husband's ability to understand and his willingness to change, to adapt to his wife's desired role. This does not mean capitulation, it involves negotiation and compromise---for both partners. Again, it must be stressed that without a mutual and strong desire by both spouses to keep the marriage intact as a meaningful relationship, mutual success will not be realized.

Conclusion

The case of Sara and Ralph serves as an example of a complex interpersonal and social conflict which military families are susceptible to. There is ample evidence to acknowledge the fact that a post separation syndrome does exist. There is also data to support the contention that the Women's Liberation Movement is creating marital problems and causing psychological disturbances among women of today. This paper outlined how these two different social-psychological concepts can combine to produce a uniquely devastating threat to military marriages. The causes described are an unprecedented intermix of events and conditions reflecting the military system and the impact of today's social changes on the people who serve this system. It becomes important for those of us who provide marital

counseling to recognize all aspects of marital readjustment problems subsequent to a prolonged separation. In many cases the inner turmoil of the wife and the total confusion of the husband is related to a conflict the wife is experiencing between the old marriage life style and her previously emerged life style.

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